



Ralph Miles

Oral History Transcription

September 23, 2003 [Side A]

Interviewed by:	David Healey
Place of interview:	Ralph Miles' residence
Date of interview:	September 23, 2003
Approximate length of interview:	47 minutes
Transcribed by:	Mark Flora, volunteer, Civil Rights Heritage Center
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Summary:	Ralph Miles moved to South Bend at age 3 in 1952. He spent the next sixty years as a resident of the city, going from a special-needs school to Washington High School and eventually starting his own accounting business, Universal Holy Family Professional Tax Technicians. He talks about South Bend during the 1960s from the perspective of a kid who would start fights, bring a gun to school, and steal cars. He shares a critical view of the area's civil rights groups and figures.

0:00:06 [David Healey]: Today is September 23rd. I am interviewing Mr. Ralph Mills—

[Ralph Miles]: Miles.

[DH]: Miles, excuse me. Mr. Ralph Miles, at his residence at 738 South Grant Street here in South Bend. My name's David Healey. Okay, Mr. Mills, are you a native of South Bend?

0:00:36 [RM]: No, I came to South Bend when I was about three.

[DH]: And where did your parents come from?

[RM]: Mom originally came from Memphis, Tennessee. My father was from a little town in Mississippi but my mother was from Memphis, Tennessee and we came up here when I was about three.

[DH]: Where did your parents live when you first came to South Bend?

[RM]: We stayed over on Monroe Street. We stayed in our uncle's house, down in the basement. And I remember, every time it rained, we would float little boats that we made out of popsicle sticks and stuff like that. And it was fun 'cause back then, it was something to do because they had a long tunnel down in the basement.

0:01:26 Back then, there was a great big oil furnace back there, near like, a long tunnel. Only thing I didn't like about it though was it had a lot of rats in there because when it rained, you could see the rats swimming in the water and everything and our mother would sit up at night sometimes to keep the rats from getting to us. So that was over on Monroe. It was a great big ol' house and that had like, three, four apartments in it and when we moved out of the basement, we went upstairs. I thought we was really big time then because we was on top of the basement, but it just got to the point that we gave blood.

0:02:01 That's when my father was going out to get a job, but he couldn't get a job because he left the hospital where he worked down in Memphis to come up here to get a job because my uncle had said that Bendix was hiring at the time. When he did come up here, he wasn't able to get a job at Bendix right away, so he had to take some other jobs before he went into construction and things of that nature. But I remember when he did get a job at Bendix and then we moved up out of the basement. That's when we thought we were really big time.

0:02:32 [DH]: Do you remember the year he got a job at Bendix?

[RM]: Hmm. Let's see: we moved up here when I was three... I was born in '49, so it would have been around about '52... We probably moved up here about '53 or '54.

[DH]: Okay. Where did you go to school at?

[RM]: The first school I attended was Ian Morris, which was a private school for handicapped individuals. I remember going there and when they tested me at first, they tested me for kindergarten and they didn't put me in kindergarten. They started me in a higher grade. They started me about the fifth grade and I was doing high school work by the time I was really supposed to be in the fifth grade. I was able to do high school work.

0:03:15 But yeah, I remember Morris very well. There was a nice—you know how they sent taxi cabs for us to pick us up? And if we didn't have a taxi cab available, then Mr. Arachna, T. Arachna's father, would send their limousine to pick us up. So, we'd to go to school in a limousine or either in a taxi cab.

[DH]: Was it an interracial school?

[RM]: Oh, yeah. But you had to have a handicap in order to go there. Let's see, there was three classrooms on the second level and on the upper level they had a recording studio. They used to also have a radio station out there as well.

0:04:04 And the bottom level—that's the basement— that's where we went down to eat dinner because they fed us dinner and after we ate dinner we had to go and take a nap. It was a lot of fun because a lot of times, we'd be back there, sleeping, because we always sat down, lay down for one hour after we ate. Mrs. Morse (spelling?) was the one who used to sit back there. That lady had eyes like a cat. We could be sittin' back there and it'd be dark, but she could tell who was doing what. We never really could get away with nothin'.

0:04:41 [DH]: Were your teachers all white at that school?

[RM]: Um... The teachers were white, but Mrs. Stein (spelling?) and her assistants were black. Those were the cooks.

[DH]: When you left there, did you go to high school? Regular kind?

[RM]: No. I left Ian Morris School because I wanted to be like normal kids. I kept asking my mother to let me go to school like a normal child, so she let me go to Harrison. That's when they put me back a grade because when I went to Harrison, they started me off in the [inaudible] grade.

[phone rings]

0:05:24 [DH]: Okay, you went to Harrison and then they put you back a grade.

[RM]: Right. They started me at Harrison School and the reason why is because—I think that's what really made me lose interest in school because when they put me back, the work was so easy, I didn't do nothing but just sitting around and think of things to do to get in trouble.

[DH]: This is at Harrison.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: And this would be in the late 50's?

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: And there were no black teachers at Harrison at that time.

[RM]: Yeah, there was.

[DH]: There was.

0:06:01 [RM]: There was Mrs. Witherspoon. She was a black teacher. Mr. Dixon, he was one of the black teachers there, because Mr. Dixon was more in charge of disciplinary. Like, if a child was really bad, then you would go to Mr. Dixon. That's where you would stay all day. That was almost like being in jail because he had a little red paddle that he called 'the board of education'. If you messed up, then you would meet 'the board of education'. I remember him gettin' me a couple times. He would ask you, "Do you want a machine gun or do you want the shotgun?" The machine gun, he'd just hit you real fast and the shotgun, he'd just hit you real slow and let it wait and kinda sting. He would get you for walking on the grass or running in the hallway or something like that because when we was going to school if you talked back to the teacher, you got in trouble. You better not hit one, 'cause you're going to boy's school.

0:07:01 I remember this one gentleman. He did hit the teacher: Mr. Steinberg. He

was a history teacher and him and Poonie Pope got to fightin' in the hallway and they sent Poonie Pope to the boy's school for six months for hitting a teacher.

[DH]: His name was... Poonie?

[RM]: Yeah, Poonie Pope.

[DH]: Poonie Pope.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: So, when you left Harrison, what high school did you go to?

[RM]: Then we went to Washington.

[DH]: Washington.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: And what was your experience like in Washington?

[RM]: Well, that's when I kept getting into fights because that's when it was like every spring, it was tradition of the whites and the blacks to go and fight. So, we would just roam the halls of school looking for somebody to fight. I remember a group of white boys called the Prominence.

0:07:55 [DH]: Prominence?

[RM]: Pomerance. [spelling?]

[DH]: Pomerance. A club?

[RM]: Yeah, it was a family. There was about maybe five or six of 'em.

[DH]: Oh.

[RM]: They were notorious because we used to always be fighting with them and that's when we started bringing knives and guns to school because they caught me with weapons in school and kicked me out and told them that I was not fit to be in any school in the state of Indiana. That I was incorrigible because I needed to be locked up. So that's when I went outside that one day and got into a fight with some people [inaudible] there

and I broke this policeman's jaw.

0:08:38 [DH]: I'm looking at your arrest record here. This was on January 21st, 1969.

[RM]: Right.

[DH]: And this assault actually occurred on October 31st, '68. This is at school?

[RM]: Yeah. Washington High School. Me and Earl Richardson was the only two people that was arrested that time.

[DH]: And you mentioned this was like a Spring...

[RM]: It was a Spring tradition.

[DH]: A Spring tradition that the white students and the black students would get into fights at Washington.

[RM]: Yeah. And then after the fights, everybody was just buddy-buddy because we couldn't go past Sheridan Street and they couldn't come past Sheridan. That was the dividing line.

[DH]: Sheridan ran North and South?

0:09:28 [RM]: Right. And if you got caught past Sheridan after a certain hour, then you just got jumped on. They used to have a place up on Western Avenue. It was like a little stockade that they had built for people to go and dance. It was for the white kids, but I would always go in there and I would be dancin'. Because I was always defiant. I wanted to make them do something besides go back and get my boys and we could go back and fight, but nobody ever really messed with me there. But it was pretty nice. It cost fifty cents to get in. It was just an open place where they had wooden fences around it and you go in there and dance.

0:10:06 [DH]: Now this was Azar's?

[RM]: No, it was up near Azar's.

[DH]: But it wasn't part of Azar's.

[RM]: No.

[DH]: Okay. So, it was located across the street.

[RM]: Right. In the same area.

[DH]: Okay, so we're back at the Stockade. Now, I've heard about this before. Gladys Muhammad told me about this fight at the Stockade.

[RM]: Okay.

[DH]: She said that it was basically for white kids.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: And that there was an African American who was handicapped who went in there.

[RM]: That's me.

[DH]: That's you.

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: So, you're the person who started the whole ruckus.

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: Okay. And so, what happened at the stockade? You'd been there before, obviously.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: No problem.

0:10:48 [RM]: Right. Well, there was this one girl that was there. She was kind of friendly towards blacks and her boyfriend didn't like it. So, he came up and started some problem and then I just had to knock him down. And when I knocked him down, then that's when the rest of them started and so I went back in the neighborhood and told them they jumped on me and they came up there and that's when the whole ruckus got started.

[DH]: And Gladys got arrested.

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: And her brother.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: Were you arrested?

[RM]: No, I got away that time.

[DH]: You got away that time.

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: Okay. So, the stockade wasn't part of Azar's, it was just a —

0:11:28 [RM]: Just like you take it and build a great, big, old slab of cement out there in the middle of that field over there and just put a picket fence around it and got a little concession stand up there.

[DH]: I see. Okay.

[RM]: And it didn't even have a roof on it.

[DH]: So, you're the one who started the whole fracas at the stockade.

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: Okay. What about as you went through school? Were you encouraged? You went to Washington. Now I've heard—I was interviewing Charles Orgain, and he said that Washington treated African Americans better than they did at Central. Would you concur with that?

0:12:10 [RM]: Yeah, because, see, Washington was more like our territory and Central was more or less upper echelon because that's where most of your politician's kids went to, or people that had money went to Central. Like there was the Kelly boys. The one that Joe Kelly that had the radio station, Hoosier Favorite. His son went to Central and they were fighting, so we just, for tradition, we had to fight different peoples. We didn't try to kill 'em or nothin' like that. We just wanted to give 'em a good whoopin'.

[DH]: I see. Okay, so what about the coaches at Central High School? Did they encourage black athletes?

[RM]: The coaches at Central—

[DH]: Or excuse me, at Washington.

0:12:56 [RM]: Okay, Washington. Mr. Van DeCamp, Mr. Roggeman. Those are the two that I can really recall because Mr. Van DeCamp was a little short man, but he would grab you by the collar in a minute. He'd slam you against the locker and everything else, he caught you fighting or something you weren't supposed to be doing. And Mr. Van DeCamp, I believe he was in charge of the football. Those were the two coaches that blacks as well as whites respected because they wouldn't care about grabbing you.

[DH]: I see. They treated everybody the same.

[RM]: They didn't care whether you were black, white, yellow, polka dot, or green, if you were out of place or you weren't where you were supposed to be, you had to answer to them.

0:13:38 [DH]: Sounds fair. So, when did you graduate from high school?

[RM]: I didn't.

[DH]: You did not graduate.

[RM]: No, they kicked me out of the school for carrying a weapon.

[DH]: What kind of weapon was it?

[RM]: A gun.

[DH]: A gun. Why did you bring it to school?

[RM]: Well, because I wanted to be bad and I stole this man's .38 out of his house and walked around with .38.

[DH]: So, this would be in the '60s.

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: Now up to the '60s. This is during the civil rights era.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: A lot of changes occurred in South Bend during that time. There

were marches... What did... as a young man. What did you think about the NAACP and the Urban League? Did you think they were doing enough?

0:14:29 [RM]: No. The Urban League was more or less into like a social atmosphere. If you came from, say, a family that didn't have a lot of money or your father didn't have a good job or something like that or you were not into politics, they kind of shunned you. The Urban League was more or less like a little social clique. They were more concerned about wine and sip dinners and cheese dinners than the problems that actually faced the black community. A lot of money that was going to the Urban League was misappropriated, and a lot of people that were supposed to be getting help or their house was getting fixed up or helping them with transportation, get back and forth to a job, it wasn't being done.

0:15:13 That's one of the reasons why a lot of blacks didn't really participate with the Urban League, and a lot of the money that was taken from the Urban League and given to other individuals that opened up a meat market. There was a meat market that was open here on the corner of Monroe and Columbia. It was just a lot of abuse of the funds. The girl that was working at the Urban League was like, if you didn't know the director at the time, then you didn't work there very long.

[DH]: So, there were some sexual harassments or so to speak going on?

[RM]: A lot of it.

[DH]: A lot of that. The Urban League got tied in with the CommunityWide Credit Union.

[RM]: They tried to get tied in. Ben Johnson tried to make that come to be but it never really materialized as far as I know.

0:16:08 [DH]: Okay. There was a connection there with Mr. Johnson. Originally, CommunityWide wasn't called CommunityWide. Can't remember exactly what it was called, but it was started to help black families secure loans for housing here in South Bend to even the scales out because the white banks were not providing loans. You could get a loan for your car, but you couldn't get a loan to fix up your house, you couldn't get a loan to buy a house, and you certainly couldn't buy a house outside of certain areas of South Bend at that time.

0:16:39 [RM]: See, Al Castolla, which was Castolla Builders, had a program which

was the 235 Program where they went around and they built government houses at the government expenses and that's when they started building the 235 Program. And they also built what they called the corporate houses. They were houses they just put up for lease. When they would put 'em up, we used to go in there and get those little nails that way. You know, we're punching holes in the boxes and we would use them in our slingshots and things. It was quite a bit of excitement there because 'til they put the house up, we would go in there and take possession of it and turn it into our little clubhouse.

0:17:24 [DH]: This was the 235 Program.

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: You know what that 235 meant?

[RM]: It was government-assisted housing.

[DH]: Government-assisted housing.

[RM]: The 235 Program basically was you didn't have to come up with that much money. All you needed to do was have a job and the government would pay for that house for you. You know, your down payment. And you would make regular payments.

[DH]: Did your parents ever talk to you about having trouble finding a home here in South Bend?

[RM]: No, because my father built their home. The only thing he had trouble was, when they first came here and we had to live in the basement and that was because he didn't have a job. But after that, no, it was not really that difficult for us to find housing because he was not poor when we came here.

0:18:09 We came from Memphis, Tennessee and I remember, we was staying in a mixed neighborhood back in Memphis, Tennessee, because I used to ride a little white girl on my tricycle up and down the streets. And we had hardwood floors, crystal chandeliers. We had a beautiful home in Memphis. As a matter of fact, I don't know why they left Memphis to come to South Bend because in Memphis we were living like royalty. My father worked at the hospital, my mother, she worked, so we had plenty of money and my great-great grandmother had told me that we were not really servants, I mean, descendants of slaves. That we were more or less

selected people from the mouths that helped us to get started here, and these were some of people that owned a lot of money and stuff like that.

0:18:58 So, no, we weren't really domesticated slaves, but we were protected because, see, Germany used to go and raid the ships on the seas. And for you to stay you had a choice: they'd take you back to Africa, take you to America as a free servant, or take you to Germany.

[DH]: What year was this?

[RM]: That was way back.

[DH]: Way back.

[RM]: During slavery, slavery on the high seas.

[DH]: I've never heard that before.

[RM]: [inaudible] all that.

[DH]: So, what about housing for yourself?

[RM]: Me? I never had a problem getting housing.

0:19:30 [DH]: I've heard this from many African-Americans, that there were certain areas of South Bend, ghetto areas that if you came to South Bend, this was the area you were shown and you weren't shown any homes anywhere else.

[RM]: Yeah, that's true. Alonzo Watson was the broker back then.

[DH]: Uh-huh.

[RM]: And a lot of black folks did not really care that much for Mr. Watson because he didn't really make an effort to show you houses in the white sections of town, but that was because he had to make a living for his family and why waste his time showing you houses in all-white neighborhoods where he knows the chances of you getting a house were very slim. So, I can understand why he did show you, but he did honestly try to show you the best houses in the black area. He didn't show you the raggediest ones.

0:20:25 He did what he could do because only recently, and that was back in the

'80s... Later part of the '80s did housing really open up to any great degree here. But even to this day there are still some places that blacks cannot live.

[DH]: Really. Where would that be?

[RM]: Some of your upper suburbs. You have to pay twice as much to live there. That's an all-white suburb that exists right now that they got covenants on that says you cannot sell your house to anyone that has an ethnic background. It has to be white or something like that. There's several places like that that that didn't exist.

[DH]: Okay. So, in the '60s—we talked about the Urban League. What about the NAACP?

0:21:12 [RM]: I joined the NAACP 'cause I thought I wanted to make a change and fight for the right causes and everything, but that was just a farce because they really didn't want to tackle the tough issues. It was more like, you can have a voice but don't speak too loud. So, a lot of things that were going on, especially with the youth, when we didn't have enough places to go like with the stockade, they wouldn't tackle those issues. But if it was something that was safe for them to tackle, they would tackle it. But the NAACP didn't do a whole lot then and they're not really doing all that much now.

[DH]: Yes. You're talking about Plan Z that they got through?

0:21:57 [RM]: Plan Z was the lesser of the two evils. Plan Z just simply took kids that was in one school that weren't doing productive work and put them into another area. They had to do something because if you came from, like, LaSalle, or if you came from a predominantly black school, you didn't have a chance of getting into a good college. And the sports. Yeah, they would look into your sports abilities as far as being able to play football or basketball, but let's face it, everybody can't get there on football and basketball.

0:22:33 So, Plan Z gives kids a better chance to see what life is like outside of their immediate neighborhood because that's what caused us to be so restricted—by living in the neighborhood where we didn't have an opportunity to see how other people live. We were doomed before we even got started.

[DH]: There was another group that started at the same time in the early

'70's called the Black American Coalition.

[RM]: Mm-hmm. That was Dr. Chamblee's group.

[DH]: Right.

0:23:11 [RM]: He was highly opposed to NAACP. As a matter of fact, he was given—it was at Notre Dame and they let me speak out there and I just simply told them, "Look, you're no better than the Ku Klux Klan, the Nazis, or anybody because you're preaching racial hatred. Whether you be black, white, yellow, green, or polka dotted. If you teach unity, you don't judge a man by the color of his skin but rather judge him by his action and his merit as to how he treats you." Then we'll be a long way to solving some of the problems we have in this community today.

0:23:50 But everybody's into things as black and white. It's not black and white. It's economics. If you got the money, you're accepted. If you don't have the money, you're not accepted. Just simple as that. It's not a racial thing; it's an economic thing, and that's one of the reasons why today we are in a squeeze play with Japan, Taiwan, China, and all these other countries because they're basically paying their people slave wages. So how can we as a free nation compete with a nation that don't pay them but \$5 a day? There's no way in the world you can live in America with \$5 a day, but in Japan or any of these other developing countries? \$5 a day is like making \$30 a day here.

[DH]: Mm-hmm.

0:24:39 [RM]: So we have to realize that if we concentrate on solving our own problems and working within our own means and having our people do the best that they can do and teaching our kids that the system doesn't owe you anything but you owe it to the system to go out there and do the best that you can, to create your own job if you can't find a job, then we'll be some place. Because the small entrepreneur is the backbone of this country.

[DH]: That's right.

[RM]: If it wasn't for the ma and pa operations, we wouldn't be the great nation that we are today.

0:25:15 [DH]: After you left high school and you became involved in the civil rights movement, you must have been part of the black coalition, then... Black

American Coalition. Dr. Chamblee told me he was very disillusioned with the NAACP and that's why he started the Black American Coalition, because he wanted to deal with specific issues here in South Bend. Did you take part in those—

[RM]: Some of 'em.

[phone rings]

[DH] So you took part in some of those—

[RM]: Right.

[DH] —demonstrations.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: Part of that, of course, was Linden School at the time. Demonstrations about Linden School.

[RM]: Right.

0:25:57 [DH] I guess I want you to think about what it was like in South Bend during that time. What was it like for an African-American to be living in South Bend in the early '60s?

[RM]: It was really difficult because you had to fight the blacks that wanted to keep you down and you had to fight the whites who wanted to keep you down.

[DH]: Question: the blacks that wanted to keep you down?

[RM]: Oh, yes. There were a lot of blacks that wanted to keep you down. They didn't want you to rise above their status in life because they were making a good living by going out there telling folks downtown that they were the one could control everything. There was a problem in the black neighborhood coming in, "I'll be able to handle it for you. Just bring it to me." There were a lot of blacks that [inaudible] a long time ago.

0:26:52 [DH]: I never heard that before. You actually had blacks that more or less, I guess, were traitors.

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: [unintelligible] that would work with the white administration downtown and say that okay, if you give me a little extra on the table or a job or something, I'll control these—

[RM]: Exactly. And that's why we were always fighting. To mention one, Charlie Howell.

[DH]: Charlie Howell.

0:27:29 [RM]: As long as Charlie could get the administration to go along with what he wanted to go along with, Charlie was up at Washington Street at the labor union and different things. [inaudible] Telling us, "Well, fellas, don't go out there and do nothing wrong. Don't destroy nothing. We'll handle it for you. We're going to make sure you get what you need for the skating rink," and things of this nature, but it never materialized. It was just to pacify us, but then the minute we started fighting because we got tired of waiting, the first people we would see were Charlie Howell, Reverend Davis—

[phone rings]

0:28:09 [DH]: That's good. So, you think there was an agreement between—

[RM]: Oh yes, definitely. We were sold out by our own blacks. That's one of the reasons why Dr. Chamblee didn't care to mess with the NAACP.

[DH]: That's why he started his own group.

[RM]: Right. Because he knew the NAACP had been bought and sold a long time ago.

[DH]: Now, he told me that one of the problems he had here in South Bend was that the blacks divided themselves on the color of their skin. If they were lighter skinned, they even referred to them as 'blue bloods'.

[RM]: We used to call them something else.

[DH]: Okay, but was that true?

[RM]: Yeah. Very true.

[DH]: That's probably what you're talking about here, then.

0:28:56 [RM]: Yeah. Very true. If you were light skinned, had good hair, and everything, then yeah, you were accepted to work right next to the white folks. But if you was black, dark black, with kinky hair or whatever, then you stayed in the background. You know, there used to be a little joke they used to say. "If you're half white, you're alright but if you're black you stay back." So, it was the dark-skinned blacks that didn't have a lot. If you had money, you could step to the forefront. If you had something going, you could step to the forefront.

0:29:33 Like Wally Hoover. He ran numbers and he had plenty of money going for him. He used to have several liquor stores and like my aunt and uncle, the Nesbit's, they could say a thing to get things done and Charlie Hobbs 'cause he had businesses and stuff like that. Because at one time Charlie was happy, okay, but it just got to the point where Charlie just started downhill. He just cared about what Charlie could get, but he wasn't by himself because there were, like I said, a lot of 'em. Lee McKnight, he's at the Urban League protecting his own little private social club and if you didn't go along with the program, you didn't get nothing from them. And it was a mess.

[DH]: So, you not only had to fight the white establishment. The first thing you had to do was get out from underneath your own people—

[RM]: Exactly.

[DH]: Who were holding you back.

0:30:29 [RM]: And that's why a lot of individuals, especially the youths coming up in my age group, we used to tell them a lot of times, just don't talk to us. We sometimes threw bricks at them because they were up there trying to stop us from fighting for what we wanted to believe in and they were telling us that we were gonna get it and it never materialized. Like when they built the LaSalle Park Center.

[DH]: At the Lake.

[RM]: Right. That was at the expense of Melvin Phillips losing his leg. Tommy before him getting hit in the head. Shot with pellets. And my brother-in-law, he was up in that little LaSalle Park Center. They were shooting up in there. The only reason they built LaSalle Park Center was to keep us from burning half the city down, because that's when we were gonna bomb O'Brien Paint Factory.

0:31:14 [DH]: Now what group was going to bomb O'Brien? Was this an organized group of young men?

[RM]: Oh yeah. We were organized.

[DH]: What was the name of the group?

[RM]: The Entertainers.

[DH]: The Entertainers.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: Sort of a nondescript name, but—

[RM]: Well, we were a little gang back then and yeah, we would—

[bang]

[RM]: Ah, there you go. And we would burn down the started most of the fights. We were the ones who were carrying the battle. We was the Entertainers.

[DH]: There was another group in—

[RM]: The Colladoons?

[DH]: Okay.

[RM]: Prestons? And the Untouchables?

[DH]: These are all gangs.

[RM]: Yes.

[DH]: There was a group in town that was organized by Mr. Newbill.

[RM]: Bobby Newbill?

[DH]: Juliana's father.

[RM]: Mmm...

0:32:10 [DH]: Called 'the Liberation School' or the Libs. And they went around and followed South Bend Police officers and made sure they didn't beat up black men. Did you ever hear of them?

[RM]: Must have been a very secret organization. We knew about almost every group that existed in the city.

[phone rings]

[DH]: So, you never heard of that group.

[RM]: They probably existed because I do know the Newbill's were popular over on the west end of town. You now, Mary Anne Newbill, Grampa Newbill, Mama Newbill. They had the barbershop. That's where we used to get our hair fixed. They probably existed, but we never knew about 'em because whenever we got in trouble, we had to always look for ourselves. That's why I was saying that every side of town had its own set of people that it worked with, and we were the Lake. But we more or less controlled the west side, the east side. The only side we didn't halfway control was the southeast side.

0:33:10 [DH]: And what do you mean by control?

[RM]: Well, you had to get permission to get on the west side of town. It's just like with the kids today. If you were caught on my side of town, you'd get beat up. No, we wouldn't kill you but we would give you a nice little whoopin'.

[phone rings]

[RM] A lot of the problem that blacks faced in this community were not because of the whites. It wasn't. It was 'cause of blacks that went into the community and stirred up controversy in the black community and had us go out there fightin' and actin' a fool, burning and throwing bricks and carrying on when it'd do nothing but build them a better position downtown.

0:33:55 [DH]: Is it black people downtown—

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: In the administration there would be mayors—

[RM]: Right.

[DH]: Different mayors—

[RM]: Like when Lloyd Allen was in there. He had a whole lot of his henchmen come out in the community to start trouble in the black community so that we would go out there and fight and riot and then they would go down there like Mr. Maxwell and make themselves look great at our expense.

[DH]: This was mayor—what was it?

[RM]: Lloyd Allen. And Roger Parent. Miller. All of 'em, basically, had their own people in there that they could send into the neighborhoods to get stuff stirred up.

[DH]: Now, did you live at the Lake then?

[RM]: Yeah. Still on Chicago Street.

0:34:45 [DH]: What was it like at the Lake? I mean, I've heard that during the '60s that—I was on that ride, trolley ride with Lynn Coleman who said there was a tree there. He showed us the old—

[RM]: That was on the corner of Washington and Doctor. That was the Learning Tree.

[DH]: The Learning Tree.

[RM]: Now he said that the black youth used to congregate under that tree.

[DH]: They did.

[phone rings]

[DH] Talk about the Learning Tree there. The South Bend Police officers used to come down there and throw tear gas.

[RM]: Mmm... Well, that's because we were doing little things to them too.

[DH] And what were you doing to them?

0:35:33 [RM]: We would call 'em out on the Lake under false pretenses and hide in—back then, it was all field, basically. And we'd shoot at 'em.

[DH]: And what'd you shoot at 'em with?

[RM]: Well—

[DH]: BB guns, pellet guns, or real guns?

[RM]: Real guns.

[DH]: Real guns.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: Okay. So how did they retaliate?

[RM]: That's part of the reason why they probably shot them in LaSalle Center, because when they come out here, they didn't know if they were gonna get shot at or not. Yeah, we were shootin' at 'em.

[DH]: So, LaSalle Center, that was in '67.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: You think it just was a breaking point?

0:36:15 [RM]: Yes, because you're going out there, you're thinking that you are really going to come out there to help somebody, then all of sudden, somebody's ambushing you and shooting at you and you can't catch 'em because we knew the Lake like the back of our hands. There was no way in the world you could catch us because we had little things we had dug out in the field, little trenches and things of that nature. We had little pathways that we could get through that you couldn't get through with a car. There was no way that you could catch us. We controlled all the way from Chicago Street all the way back to the tracks. [inaudible] to Meade, we looked like the back of hands and once we get to the field, you could never catch us, night or day.

[DH]: Okay, but you didn't actually injure any of the—

[RM]: No, we didn't actually shoot at them to kill 'em. We just wanted to scare 'em.

0:37:07 [DH]: I heard there were some fire bombings out there. Did people from the white community come out there and firebomb or was that members of the black community that were violent?

[RM]: To be honest with you, it was people in the black community that did it. [inaudible] white person wouldn't cross over into that line because he had to get back across it. That's why there was a lot of blacks that were going up there, starting problems in the black community and blaming it on the whites.

[DH]: For their own—

[RM]: Selfish agenda.

[DH]: Okay. Were these groups of people or they were an organization that was trying to do this?

[RM]: They were people that were tied into the different, various organizations that wanted to stay in power and get federal money because back then, it was almost like they blackmailed the administration. "If you don't give us the money, we're gonna turn the kids loose." More or less, we were their trained dogs, in other words.

[DH]: You didn't know it at the time.

0:38:04 [RM]: No. We thought we were doing something, but as we grew older and more wiser, they couldn't control us like they used to.

[DH]: I see.

[RM]: But no, they were the one that was coming and telling us we need to go out there and grab somebody and... It was dumb because I remember a friend of mine. He was a white guy. Me and him were like brothers and a group of blacks had jumped him up at Washington High School. When he stood up, blood was all over him. And then they got mad at me because I was fighting alongside of him. But, you know, all of the whites were not bad, you know. There were a lot of blacks that fought alongside the whites and a lot of whites that fought alongside of blacks that whites were beating up. It was just a lot of confusion and, to make a long story short, it was just people that wanted to keep troubles going so that they could benefit themselves.

0:39:01 [DH]: What about the O'Brien Paint idea? Where did that come from?

[RM]: Me.

[DH]: To burn O'Brien Paint Store down. But you changed your mind.

[RM]: Yup.

[DH]: You decided it might be a little too dangerous for the neighborhood.

[RM]: Some people changed my mind for me.

[DH]: People who were leaders of the community at the time?

[RM]: No, they were some members of the gang because they were telling me, "Ralph, what if we kill somebody. We're all goin' up for murder." I was the one that was most violent. At the time I didn't care because I had to prove myself. And I simply figured that that would get the biggest attention, if we just bombed the O'Brien Paint Factory—it was better than burning down Sandock's Furniture Store.

0:39:49 [DH]: Sandock's did get burned down. Do you know who did that?

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: Okay. Was there a reason to burn Sandock's down?

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: What was the reason?

[RM]: Sandock would sell you furniture, but it would be at an exuberant price and sometimes when you couldn't make your payment, he'd come and take your furniture from you. He wasn't always doing the best he could for the black community. He was just there trying to get the most out of it because the same sofa that he would sell for, say, \$500, he could go someplace else and buy it for \$300, so he wasn't really trying to help the black community. He was there trying to get all he could out of the black community, so he happened to be one of the ones that we bombed.

0:40:34 [DH]: I see. So, he was more like a parasite from the black community—

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: Than actually helping the black community.

Let's talk a little about jobs. What do you remember about finding work here in South Bend during that time?

[RM]: That's when they had the STEP Program and the different youth programs where you could go and get a job working, 'cause I remember they got me a job working at St. Mary's College under the STEP Program. It paid so much an hour. Chuck Orgain was the one that hit it most of those programs and he used to be a custodian at the Harrison School. We'd have more respect for Chuck than anybody else because at least Chuck was straight up with you. If he could do something for you, he would tell you; if he couldn't, he wouldn't lie to you. So, we had a lot of respect for him, but he's the one who brought most of the jobs in.

0:41:29 And George Hill helped to get us jobs and that's really what kind of stopped us from really going out there, doing a whole lot of things, because we were upset about the fact that in the summer we ain't have no money and we were gonna get some money one way or the other.

[DH]: Now Mr. Orgain, when I interviewed him—he was on that interracial committee sponsored by the mayor's department—and he alluded to the fact that that was basically a big show.

[RM]: It's true.

[DH]: He wouldn't comment too much, he wouldn't name any names. Of course, he's from a different generation. He still doesn't want to upset anyone. Most of the people are passed away now, but would you care to comment on that organization?

0:42:18 [RM]: Okay, it was to get money to the ones that did their bidding. That's what it boiled down to. If they could tell you to go out there and throw a firebomb into this person's house and you'd done it, you could get a job. If you were told to go out there and vandalize this business, you got a job. For instance, Romy Hammes was up here on the corner Western and Olive and it was told to a group of us to cause him some problems. So, we went up there and we stole a whole truckload of Mustangs. We had a caravan of Mustangs to Chicago. The police knew they were stolen, but they didn't do nothing to us.

[DH]: So, Mr. Hammes did something to the administration that the administration didn't like.

[RM]: Right. We made his life miserable.

[banging]

0:43:18 [DH]: Kreamo Bakery bread boycott. What do you remember about that?

[RM]: That was when everybody decided that they were not gonna buy no Kreamo bread because Kreamo bread group was not gonna hire blacks.

[DH]: Dr. Chamblee told me a little bit about that. He said people went door-to-door and had pamphlets.

[RM]: They went door-to-door. There was a pamphlet.

[whirring]

[RM]: It's just like an insult.

[DH]: Oh.

0:43:50 [RM]: They wanted to get Kreamo Bakery to hire some blacks, but the only problem that came down after that was which black would they hire? And that was the biggest problem. They didn't have a problem hiring some blacks. The biggest employer of blacks was Studebaker and Bendix at the time, but it was hard to get into places like Kreamo Bakery because all they had was basically whites. So, they were just boycotting and they weren't buying Kreamo Bakery and it took a long time for Kreamo to recover from that because that was one of the most effective boycott that this city has seen. Because they started buying Tip Top or Wonder Bread.

And everybody started liking Wonder Bread, but still some liked Kreamo because Kreamo opened up a lot of bread stores and [unintelligible] lowered the price and so for several reasons, but mainly because they wouldn't hire blacks and the price of Kreamo bread was higher than the other bread.

0:44:50 [DH]: Do you remember the blacks that they hired? Do you remember the names of those people?

[RM]: No, it was some of the people that was in with the clique.

[DH]: In with the clique.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: Dr. Chamblee told me that Kreamo said that they'd hire blacks and then they hired one and his skin was whiter than most of the white people.

[RM]: No kiddin'.

[DH]: Then they had to go back and, "Okay, you hired a black, but nobody knows he's black. We wanna see some black people hired." And they hired two more. They hired one black truck driver.

0:45:29 [RM]: Oh. Yeah, that's true. But see, there's a lot of things that other blacks did in this town that didn't even get credit for it. I went down to I&M back when they were on Colfax. I went all the way upstairs and said, "You know, black folks like to see some of their own people down here if they're payin' the bills. It'd be a shame if somebody come through here and start a whole lot of problems because you don't have no blacks down here." So, the next thing I know, about two weeks later, I went back to the delivery company. They had two black peoples.

[DH]: This is downstairs. You walked in to pay your bill.

[RM]: Yeah. You used to just see no blacks down there.

[DH]: What about downtown in general? Do you remember that transition when, in the '40s and '50s, there were no black people downtown? No sales clerks, nothing. Do you remember that transition?

0:46:29 [RM]: Yeah, that's because they got to the Ganes and told the Ganes that if they didn't start hiring blacks, they start stealing and creating problems.

[DH]: Okay.

[RM]: So that's what we were doing. We got paid for creating a lot of problems.

[DH]: Okay. What about the Black Muslims here in town?

[RM]: They were always somewhat passive. They didn't get into trouble. They were the ones that more or less just stuck to themselves because they had mosque right on the corner of Wellington... and an alley of Wellington. We used to go down there. They had some of the best—

[Audio ends]